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PATERSON

Judge Blocks Paterson Councilman-Elect Facing Voter Fraud Charges From Taking Office

The judge pointed to the "many irregularities" in the election that may have harmed the public's trust in the voting process, and said the injunction was done to stop Alex Mendez from being sworn in on July 1

By **Jonathan Dienst** • Published June 30, 2020 • Updated on July 1, 2020 at 11:52 pm



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A Passaic County judge issued a temporary injunction Tuesday to keep Paterson Councilman-elect Alex Mendez from taking office, just days after Mendez was hit with election fraud charges.

Mendez has refused all calls, from the governor down, to step aside and said the "politically powerful" were trying to interfere with the will of Hispanic voters. The injunction is intended to be in effect until an August hearing.

In making his decision, Judge Ernest Caposela said that he was most concerned about the public interest of a fair election, "not whether someone is criminally liable or who is responsible for the ballots being thrown here or down there." Caposela also pointed to the "many irregularities" in the election that may have harmed the public's trust in the voting process.

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"I don't see how I could let the people of Paterson have to accept the fact that this was a fair and free election, that it was a full expression of their intent. I don't see how I can do that right now," said Caposela. "I am willing to hear the election contest. But I just think it would be a tremendous undermining of the voting system, the public trust to let Mr. Mendez be sworn in tomorrow."

The judge said the injunction was done in order stop Mendez from being sworn in, which was scheduled to happen Wednesday. Mendez appealed the judge's decision, but the appeal was denied Wednesday.

2:60

Gov. Murphy Calls on Paterson City Council Members to Step Down

Both Paterson City Council Vice President Michael Jackson and council member-elect Alex Mendez have said they are going to fight the charges, and do not... **Read more**

In a statement Saturday, Mendez said the criminal charges alleging he had engaged in voter fraud "...are just desperate attempts to suppress the Hispanic vote in Paterson."

In that statement, Mendez suggested the charges filed by State Attorney General Grubir Grewal were politically motivated to help his rival Mayor Andre Sayegh. Mendez went on to accuse the mayor of supporting the rich "...at the expense of our citizens."

"It is also no surprise the governor, a close ally of the mayor, would support his attempt to keep business as usual," Mendez said.

Mendez's statement came after he was hit with half a dozen election-fraud-related charges that carry a minimum of three years in prison if convicted.

Paterson's recent vote-by-mail election was plagued by election fraud allegations ranging from vote stealing to bundling to submitting bogus voter registrations.

Attorney General Grewal called Mendez and Council Vice-President Michael Jackson "criminals" after filing the election fraud charges against both politicians last Thursday.

For weeks, residents and community leaders in Paterson were demanding an investigation into the widespread voting fraud allegations - with many residents alleging they have been disenfranchised amid the alleged vote stealing schemes.

The head of the local NAACP chapter said the alleged corruption was so widespread, the election results should be thrown out and a new election ordered.

A Passaic County spokesman has said 20% of the vote was disqualified due to varying irregularities.

Governor Murphy called for Mendez and Jackson to step aside on Friday after criminal charges were filed.

"Based on these accusations, Council Vice President Jackson and Councilmember-elect Mendez must step aside as this investigation progresses," Murphy said. "Anything else undermines the public's sacred trust in democracy."

In addition to Grewal charging the two elected Paterson politicians, he also charged two others who worked on campaigns. That investigation is ongoing.

"We will not allow a small number of criminals to undermine the public's confidence in our democratic process," Grewal said when he announced the charges Thursday.

Mendez and Jackson both deny any wrongdoing. Mendez's attorney plans to appeal the judge's injunction.

Mendez's opponent, longtime Councilman Bill McKoy, has called for a new election.

"If Mr. Jackson and Mr. Mendez are allowed to be sworn in, they will directly benefit from the fraud of which they are accused, which will make a mockery of the system that many have fought and died to protect. Patersonians deserve better," McKoy said recently.

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